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# Probing the Depths of The Glomar Mystery

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This is a troublesome book, dealing as it does with a recent chapter in the history of American espionage. The book calls itself "the incredible inside story" of the Hughes Glomar Explorer, a super-ship that was a triumph of engineering, supposedly designed, built and operated for one purpose: to pick a crippled Russian submarine off the ocean floor, three miles down in the Pacific.

The story of the Explorer reveals much about this country's belief in superior technology, its romance with the clandestine and its ultimate political naivete. The Explorer first entered the public consciousness early in 1975. This mega-ship, patterned after oil-drilling rigs and research vessels, became a close but uncertain encounter in a fog bank, a flying Dutchman that piqued further curiosity about billionaire recluse Howard Hughes, whose Summa Corp. provided the cover for the ship, the Central Intelligence Agency, the cold war and countless other riddles then preoccupying the press and the public.

At least two nonfiction books and a novel have delved into the Explorer's origins, its mission (or missions) and the CIA's attempted suppression of the press which occurred once the story began to break. None—including "A Matter of Risk"—has produced satisfactory answers as to whether the Explorer retrieved part or all of the sub, or performed some other, undisclosed mission.

Roy D. Varner is a writer and Wayne R. Collier, according to this book, recruited most of the crew that sailed the Explorer into the Pacific to retrieve the Soviet sub. The book contains intimate and often repulsive details—the crews were exposed to the smell of "rotten meat" to prepare them for the stench of decayed bodies—that smack of verisimilitude.

"A Matter of Risk" parallels and elaborates on the supposedly "official" account told by then CIA Director William E. Colby to countless newsmen when he thought the Glomar secret might still be contained. But the authors of this book properly point out that Colby's confusing and seemingly contradictory attempts to limit circulation of the story came only after the Los Angeles Times had printed the tale of the submarine retrieval story, and at a time when the CIA needed a success.

## A MATTER OF RISK

By Roy Varner and Wayne Collier

(Random House, 206 pp., \$10)

Since Colby's initial justification of the ship as a technological triumph, the federal government has maintained an official silence about the Explorer's reasons for existence. Even for those who would prefer to think of the Explorer as bold and innovative technology, this silence also defies the logic of the official story.

Howard Hughes is dead, Richard Nixon is out of office, the CIA still licks its wounds in public—but is in fact alive and well—and perhaps it is right to clutch any remaining secrets to its breast, given the traumas of recent years.

Yet the legacy of espionage is doubt—doubt in the public mind, doubt (as this book testifies) even in the minds of the hired operatives aboard the Explorer, doubt everywhere. For an intelligence service, doubt is often to be desired. The authors of this book enter a maze and leave it, apparently unsatisfied about the deeper questions of the Glomar's mission and its success. Their readers may pass through the 15 chapters even less satisfied. All the public evidence indicates that the CIA would have it no other way.

Somewhere in that formula, there is tragedy. If Varner and Collier—and the public—have been had, even if the ultimate aim is to hide something from the Russians, that is too bad. If the authors' account is true, gruesome as it is, the public deserves to know it.

This book is by turns dull and overloaded with technical detail, yet occasionally exciting despite the possible naivete of the authors. It may be a bit of deliberate, but more likely unconscious, disinformation, or it may be a glimpse inside the truth.

This reviewer, who has not plumbed the depths of the Explorer's mysteries, doubts that the authors have either. There is the tragedy. The caveat is not for the buyer of books so much as for the perpetrators of mysteries. If you triumph and no one believes it, where is the triumph? Presidents and Congresses, as recent events prove overwhelmingly, can doubt the intelligence services as readily as the press and the public can. That could be the ultimate tragedy, if credibility is masked by uncertainty and destroyed. The messenger might really be bringing the truth.